Experimental Film and Video: Concepts for Analysis

The films and videos we'll be looking at vary significantly from the usual dramatic narrative and documentary modes. Here are some concepts that can help you experience and analyze them.

Theme, rather than story, is often the uniting structural factor. "Theme" can be a recurring visual motif or can reside in the conceptual content of related images. MOTHLIGHT (Brakhage) has a beginning, middle, and end, but no narrative. Similarly with FOGLINE (Gottheim)

When there is a story, it is often told with an interior or psychological logic rather than a "realistic" plot (Deren's MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON, Bunuel and Dali's ANDALUSIAN DOG).

The link between images is usually associational rather than descriptive or discursive. (Conner's REPORT, Brakhage's WINDOW WATER BABY MOVING) The logic of image relationships is often based on content rather than chronology-- that is, the logic of dream and poetry.

Little attempt is made to preserve the illusion of real time or real space. The expressive rearrangement of actual space and time is the norm. (Snow's WAVELENGTH, Gehr's SERENE VELOCITY) Or, real time and space can be used to break from the conventions of Hollywood or "realist" presentation. (Warhol's BLOW JOB) Often the experimental film generates a new time-space context of its own.

Frequently, technical or abstract elements of the medium such as camera movement, zooming, focus, cutting rhythm, direction of object movement, rate of object movement, color, shape, texture, superimposition are exploited as primary compositional elements, with the image content, or "meaning," being of secondary importance. This is the reverse of narrative film practice. (Lawder's RUNAWAY)

For example, normally we take it for granted that the horizontal rectangle is the proper way to see film. Musician/visual artist Brian Eno disrupted this expectation by making some video works that were intended to be seen with the monitor in the vertical (portrait) position rather than the horizontal (landscape) position.

Similarly, most of the time viewers accept that the edge of the frame is there, but not important as an element. Off screen space is sometimes used to create meaning in conventional films and tapes, but usually for surprise (in horror films, the menace is just off the screen's edge) or for a mild comedy (the TV monitor can

be thought of as a box like a little puppet theatre (or it could be until flat panel became the norm, which then offers its own possibilities: panel as window, or mirror, etc.) The Muppets are almost always presented just like a little hand puppet theatre.

The relation between sound and image tends to be based more often on analogy or contrast or contradiction than on reality. (Anger's SCORPIO RISING) Lipton, DOGGIE DINER AND THE RETURN OF DOGGY DINER

The statement made or the vision presented is most often the personal one of an individual artist working directly in the medium, rather than supervising a group of hired technicians. Often the "voice" used is the personal one we find in lyric poetry: we sense the maker is speaking directly to us rather than through a "third person" or dramatic narration (Brakhage's WINDOW WATER BABY MOVING, Schndeeman's FUSES, PULL MY DAISY)

Appreciation and understanding of the experimental film requires a different method of "reading."   A mind set in the viewer akin to the one adopted in reading poetry or listening to music is usually most appropriate.

Often the maker seeks to change viewer consciousness or to operate on a different level of conscious/unconscious activity than is normal. Everyone has access to a range of different states of consciousness, experimental film often seeks access to one or several of those states.

While many experimental works clearly avoid the goal of "entertainment" this does not mean that they do not give pleasure. Often the pleasure is defined in a different way, however. Sometimes unpleasure is used as a deliberate element to affect the viewer (T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G).

The artist is often trying to change viewer consciousness by breaking both formal expectations and content expectations. Taboo breaking content is frequently used to shock or surprise or provoke laughter. This can lead to new thought and new (aesthetic) experience.

Often the social environment depicted is one deliberately set to run against the expectations of "normal" middle class manners and values. (SCORPIO RISING, FUSES, PULL MY DAISY)

Sometimes the films are deliberately puzzling: sometimes there is a solution to the puzzle, but often there is not. On first viewing, it can be a mistake to try to "put it all together" right away because the duration of puzzlement may be something being used in a creative way. Similarly, trying to find exact meanings for symbols (as in Maya Deren's work) may limit your appreciation. The power of such

symbols is often that they mean several things, or mean different things at different moments in the work.

With the above in mind, it will often be useful to ask yourself questions such as:

What is the main feeling or image that the film leaves in your mind? What is the overall mood of the film? How is that achieved? What meanings does it suggest?

What are the key images or symbols recurring in the film? Do they have a common element? Is there a thread connecting the associations set up in your mind?

On the technical/abstract level, what are the main recurrent motifs? How are they organized?

Many of the works we'll be looking at in the course are using form or style to change or shape or disrupt the content.

What's done with time? Is there an impression of chronological development? Is time broken up and rearranged? What effect does the use of time have on the overall image presented by the film?

What's done with space? Is space coherent in the film? Is it rearranged? What effect does the use of space have on the overall effect of the film?

What is done with the sound track (if there is one)? How are voice, sound, and music used in relation to each other and in relation to the image track?

What motivates or directs the changes from shot to shot, sequence to sequence? What patterns emerge in viewing?

Does the film have a structure? What defines this?

How does the film develop over time?

How does the film "educate" you to understand its aesthetics?

What are the pleasures in watching the film?